DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 403 EC 172 923

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TITLE Characteristics of Gifted Preschool Children.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (63rd, Anaheim, CA, April 15-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Gifted; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Student Characteristics; *Talent Identification

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To identify gifted preschool children, parents and teachers need to be aware of some of the characteristics that these children possess. Gifted preschool children may have verbal and mathematical abilities that are advanced beyond their years, show creativity and imagination, and have an excellent memory. They exhibit a high level of curiosity, showing an interest in a variety of topics and possibly an intense interest in one area. In addition, young gifted children are capable of abstract thinking, and showing advanced reasoning and insight abilities. (Author)

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Characteristics of Gifted Preschool Children

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ABSTRACT

In order to identify gifted preschool children, parents and teachers need to be aware of some of the characteristics that these children possess. Gifted preschool children may have verbal and mathematical abilities that are advanced beyond their years, show creativity and imagination, and have an excellent memory. They exhibit a high level of curiosity, showing an interest in a variety of topics and possibly an intense interest in one area. In addition, young gifted children are capable of abstract thinking, and showing advanced reasoning and insight abilities.

Characteristics of Gifted Preschool Children

Gifted children can be identified at a young age, even as young as 3 or 4, and they can be found in almost every preschool classroom. Thus, it is important for preschool teachers to be aware of the characteristics of gifted children so they may make appropriate educational plans for them in their preschool classroom.

A child is usually characterized as "gifted" if he or she shows above-average ability or potential in one or more of the following areas: (1) general intellectual ability, (2) specific academic aptitude, (3) leadership ability, (4) creative or productive thinking, or (5) talent in the visual or performing arts. Gifted children come from all socioeconomic levels. They may be enrolled in private preschool programs, church day care centers, or Head Start programs.

In order to meet the needs of gifted children, they must first be identified by using measures such as traditional intelligence tests, parent reports, and/or observation of behaviors exhibited in the classroom and at home. Standardized intelligence tests have been fairly unsuccessful in the identification of young gifted children. IQ tests are only partially reliable before the child reaches the age of 5 or 6 (Roeper, 1977). Gifted young children may show "peaks" of extraordinarily high performance in some areas, but not necessarily in all cognitive ability areas when they are tested using standardized tests (Roedell, 1982). They may not do well on parts of an intelligence test because of a short attention span. A young child's test score may also be depressed by the child's nervousness with an unfamiliar person in a strange room or because the child plays games with the test materials (Robinson, Roedell, & Jackson, 1981). Data from the Seattle Project (Robinson et al., 1981) suggest that scores

in areas of the child's best performance may be the best indicators of the child's capabilities. Those concerned with the child should look at what the child can do, not what he or she cannot.

Parent Reports

Parents can be used as a screening device in the identification of preschool gifted children (Lupkowski & Lupkowski, 1985). There is evidence from previous research that parents are reasonably accurate when it comes to estimating their own child's intellectual abilities. (Ciha, Harris, Hoffman, & Potter, 1974). Parents do know their own children. Parents can provide anecdotal information of unusually advanced skills (Roedell, 1982) through questionnaires and interviews. Trained judges can rate the parents' information to estimate the degree of the child's intellectual precocity (Robinson et al., 1981) and experts can rate student products. The Seattle Project was able to collect several years of evidence that parental ratings compare positively with a child's later test performance.

Observation of Characteristics

As participants in the screening process, parents and preschool teachers must be aware of the characteristics of young gifted children. The gifted child may show peaks of high performance in some areas, but not necessarily all cognitive areas. It is necessary to look for trends and patterns in the child's development (Lupkowski & Lupkowski, 1985). Following are some of the behaviors that may be shown by young gifted children.

Learns Easily and Readily

The gifted preschool child generally requires less drill when learning something new (Karnes & Strong, 1978). The child may simply

"pick up" reading or another skill.

Attention Span

The attention span of gifted preschool children is often longer than that of same-age peers. For example, a typical large group activity with preschoolers usually lasts 10 to 15 minutes, while gifted children may participate in group activities for as long as 30 minutes to 1 hour. Gifted children may work on projects for time periods up to 2 1/2 hours (Speck & Stedtnetz, 1983).

Works Well Independently

The child may withdraw from the group in order to work on his/her own projects and may not be easily distracted from those endeavors. The child may even be considered a "loner" as he or she prefers to pursue interests alone or with minimal interaction.

Creativity and Imagination

The child may have innovative ideas for uses of common materials. Creative children may act out unusual dramatic play situations, such as astronauts landing on the moon, or visiting Santa Claus at the North Pole. The creative child may be more likely to have an imaginary playmate (Lupkowski & Lupkowski, 1985).

Memory

Parents often comment on the exceptional memory their gifted children possess. For example, some three-year-olds are able to compete and win against adults when playing memory games such as "Concentration".

Wide Range of Interests

Many young gifted children are curious about a wide variety of topics and become equally absorbed in many different tasks. They seem to enjoy learning about almost everything.

Specific Interests

In addition to showing an interest in a variety of topics, these children may become intrigued by one area of interest. For example, the children may be fascinated with science and nature collections. Phil became a 3-year-old scientist, interested in investigating all kinds of insects, animals, and plant life.

Curiosity

Gifted preschoolers are eager to learn about many different things. They ask both "what" questions, and also "why" and "how". They listen attentively to the answers to their questions and often initiate further discussion and investigation (Karnes & Strong, 1978).

Language

In addition to using a large vocabulary, the children possess advanced language skills, and use correct pronunciation and sentence structure (Lupkowski & Lupkowski, 1985). They enjoy talking and may even monopolize conversations. They may also show an interest in foreign languages.

Reading

Academically gifted preschool children may show an early interest in printed matter and may begin reading before they start formal schooling (Perino & Perino, 1981). However, the presence of early reading as an indicator of giftedness has not been firmly established (Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980).

Number Concepts

Some gifted preschoolers seem to be fascinated with numbers before they begin school. Some enjoy counting from 1 through 100 while other children may begin adding and subtracting. Tony, an

exceptionally gifted 4-year-old, showed an interest in multiplying and dividing while still attending nursery school.

Abstract Thinking

Children may exhibit the ability to do a variety of abstract thinking tasks, such as adding numbers mentally or telling time. Jodi could tell how many minutes were left until a specific time, such as snack time. Children may also understand scientific concepts such as evaporation and gravity and also understand the morals to some fables and stories.

Problem-Solving

Children may enjoy thinking of solutions to situational problems such as, "How can forgetful Harry remember to put his shoes on in the morning?" (Karnes & Strong, 1978). These children may particularly enjoy exercises designed to enhance creativity, which build abilities in fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration.

Attention to Detail

Not only are they alert and observant, but the children may notice details in the environment that others overlook. The may also show an interest in news events and other things that their age mates miss. They enjoy making things more complex, such as elaborating rules for games.

Social Relationships

Social relationships vary for all preschoolers, ranging from withdrawal to leadership behaviors. Socially gifted children may be leaders of age-mates and older children. They may find innovative ways to settle disputes and may prefer to interact with older children and adults rather than same-age peers.

Sensitivity and Emotion

Gifted children who are very aware of their environment may be observant of others' feelings and moods. They may show a great deal of empathy and cry when others cry or show other emotions.

High Energy Level

Some gifted children have been called "hyperactive" because they possess such a high energy level. Some parents report that their gifted child seems to need little sleep.

Reasoning Ability

The children may show an ability to form analogies and justify their responses at a young age (White, Alexander, & Fuqua, in press). Perhaps the ability to successfully complete and justify this type of task is an indicator of advanced cognitive development.

Insight Ability

Davidson and Sternberg (1984) postulated that gifted children may be able to sift out relevant information and blend pieces of information to find solutions to complex problems. They appropriately add new information to information acquired in the past.

All of these behaviors may be evident in the preschool classroom. Teachers may also use anecdotal information from parents to aid in the identification of gifted preschoolers in their classrooms.

Conclusions

When planning educational programs for gifted preschool children, teachers must consider the characteristics of those children. They may have advanced verbal and mathematics abilities, show creativity and imagination, and be interested in a wide variety of topic areas. They may posses an exceptional memory, have an attention span longer than that of their peers, have advanced social abilities, and exhibit

abstract thinking skills.

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